

The All-Time Greatest Female Cyclists

Naming the greatest women in the history of competitive cycling seems like a tall order, because women's cycling appears, at first glance, not to have much history.

But in fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

Women have raced on bicycles since the 1800s, just like men, and each new generation has produced a fresh crop of legends. Unfortunately, and in contrast to men's racing, the history of women's cycling has a scattershot narrative, populated with important races that arrived, flourished for a few years and then vanished into the mists. (Remember the Ore-Ida Women's Challenge? Le Tour de la Drôme?)

Women's cycling lacks the comforting continuity of men's cycling, whose signature events — the Tour de France, Paris-Roubaix, the world championship and Olympic road races — seem to have endured since the beginning of time. The women's Tour de France debuted in 1984, the year of the 71st men's Tour, has existed only sporadically since, and does not exist now. The first world championship women's road race was staged in 1958, three decades after the first men's contest. Women first competed on bicycles at the Olympics in 1984, nearly a century after men.

"The men's races have been around for a hundred years," said Inga Thompson, an American cycling legend. "The women's races have kind of come and gone."

Two of Thompson's greatest victories came in the Ore-Ida event, once the most prestigious of women's stage races in North America. The Ore-Ida debuted in 1984, and in its heyday often exceeded 13 stages, with many stages well over 100 miles. Rebecca Twigg, one of Thompson's great rivals, claimed three consecutive victories. French champion Jeannie Longo won it twice. And then, in 2003, the race couldn't make its budget and simply shut down. Sixteen years later, only the most studious fans are aware that it ever existed.

A yawning disparity separates men's and women's cycling, and the comparative anonymity of women's events is but one factor. As a general rule, over the past century, women have raced shorter distances than men, reaped less publicity and earned only a fraction of the prizes and pay.

The women's world championship road race, arguably the signature event in women's cycling, was long capped at about 50 miles, a span that scarcely gave racers time to warm up. Such mileage limits persisted for decades and hindered female cyclists from reaping training benefits from their races. As a result of these constraints, many women resorted to racing with the men.

"If I was doing a local race, I would enter the men's race and the women's race, just to get the miles in," recalled Mari Holden, a retired U.S. cyclist who won six national titles.

In generations past, a woman who won a bicycle race might be awarded an ironing board or laundry soap. Over the years, as men's purses swelled and companion women's events took shape, the contrast became downright absurd, almost comical.

Karen Bliss, an American cyclist who claimed more than 300 victories, recalled a stage race in Michigan in the 1980s "where the men's overall winner won a car, and I won \$300." Connie Carpenter-Phinney,

profiled below, recalled once winning a women's race and placing third in the corresponding men's race on the same day. Her prize for winning the women's race was \$8, paid in one-dollar bills. The third-place prize in the men's race was \$35, Carpenter-Phinney never saw it, because she wasn't a man. "The guy behind me got that," she recalled.

Women's cyclists earn pennies on the dollars paid to men. Half of all professional female riders earn less than \$10,000 Euros a year (a Euro is worth roughly \$1.15), and nearly one-fifth earn no money at all, according to [a recent industry survey](#). Half of female pros work second jobs.

Bliss, a highly decorated sprint specialist, earned a peak salary of \$26,000 in 1998, about \$40,000 in today's dollars. "And that was after years of \$0, then \$8,000, and finally \$15,000," she recalled. "A guy in my position — a sprinter on a good team — could expect to make \$50,000 to \$100,000."

The gap may finally be closing. Cycling's governing body recently introduced [minimum salaries and maternity leave](#) for women. The women's World Cup, introduced in 1998 (and replaced in 2016 by the still-more-ambitious Women's WorldTour), has [brought coherence](#) to the calendar of women's racing.

The Outer Line recently published [a widely-debated article](#) about CyclingRanking, a web site that tabulates the greatest men's cyclists in history. Unfortunately, we could find nothing remotely comparable for women's cycling, a sport whose stories and stars are poorly documented, either on paper or online.

So, we set out to create a list of our own. We asked various captains of the sport — great women's cyclists current and retired, as well as two authors — to name and vote for the women's cyclists they considered history's top five. From those lists, and a raft of interviews, we have assembled brief profiles of eight all-time greats. We surveyed more than a dozen women (and one man), including every female cyclist quoted in this story, along with cycling greats Emma Pooley, Rachel Heal, Sue Novara-Reber, Marianne Vos and Marian Clignet, author Isabel Best and cycling historian Peter Joffre Nye. The women profiled below appear in the approximate order of votes they received.

Marianne Vos

"The world's best bike racer is a woman," *Outside Magazine* declared in [a recent profile](#). And perhaps it is true: Marianne Vos, a Dutchwoman of 31 who could conceivably race for several more years, received more votes in our survey than any other women's cyclist, racing or retired, living, or dead.

She currently rides for a team whose name, CCC-Liv, reads like the Roman numeral for 350. And that figure is not much higher than the number of races that Vos has won. Her victories have come in four wildly different disciplines, road racing, track racing, mountain biking, and cyclocross. No man has even approached this kind of dominance in four different cycling disciplines.

Vos is a two-time Olympic gold medalist, a three-time winner of the world championship road race, a seven-time winner of the world cyclocross championship, and a five-time winner of the UCI Women's Road World Cup, a measure of overall success across the road-racing calendar. She has claimed three editions of the Giro d'Italia Femminile. And we could go on.

In 2012, the year of her 25th birthday, Vos won the Olympic road race, the world championship road race, and the women's Giro, along with the aforementioned World Cup. *Velo* magazine named her — Marianne Vos, a woman — its [cyclist of the year in 2012](#). Her legacy was thus secure by 2015 when her strength seemed to falter and she was ordered off her bike to recuperate. Vos has since emerged as a bold advocate for gender equity in cycling. And she's back on her bike.

Jeannie Longo

Revered, respected, and reviled in seemingly equal shares, Jeannie Longo is the one female cyclist whose name registers even to casual fans. La Longo was the sport's biggest name for most of two decades, utterly dominant across a wide swath of top-drawer races from the mid-1980s until the early 2000s. She may well be the greatest female cyclist of her era, but now there is a discomfiting sense that no one will ever really know how good she was.

Her husband and coach, Patrice Ciprelli, [was convicted for illegal importation of EPO](#), cycling's infamous wonder drug, a blood booster capable of elevating a middling cyclist into a champion. The widespread assumption is that some of that EPO found its way to Longo, although she herself failed only one drug test, in 1987, for the stimulant ephedrine.

Longo won more than 1,000 races during an unfathomably long career. She started racing in 1979. She won her first French national championship that year. Thirty-two years later, at the absurd age of 52, she won her 59th and final French title. By then, many competitors were young enough to be her daughters. She never really retired.

She was the sort of racer so dominant that other racers, great ones, would curse the sad fate that their peak years coincided with hers. She won 13 world titles in various disciplines, including four consecutive world-championship road races in the late 1980s and a fifth in 1995, a record total. She won three consecutive editions of the women's Tour de France. She broke 38 cycling records and claimed four Olympic medals, one of them gold.

"You take that kind of talent and then add the mania of dedication and the loner personality, and you have an athlete who's far and above," said Kendra Wenzel, a retired American cycling star. "You take away the dope, and I think you'd still have an athlete like Longo dominating."

Connie Carpenter-Phinney

It's easy to forget, all these years later, that American women actually led their nation's resurgence into the sport of cycling in the latter half of the 20th century. Audrey McElmury, a forgotten cycling pioneer from San Diego, claimed America's first modern world championship at a rainy road race in 1969. Marianne Martin, a Michigander swept up in the nation's cycling revival, won the first women's Tour de France in 1984, two years before Greg LeMond's historic victory for the men. Mere days after Martin's triumph, Connie Carpenter-Phinney, a speed-skater-turned-cyclist from Wisconsin, claimed America's first gold medal in the Olympic road race.

That Olympic gold capped a storied career. Born in 1957, Carpenter-Phinney spent her teens as an Olympic-caliber speed skater, cross-training on a bicycle, as many Upper Midwesterners did, until an ankle injury sent her into the cycling camp for good. She emerged as an instant star in 1976 with the first of 12 national championships on road and track. Carpenter-Phinney was never an internationally dominant cyclist, but she was a perennial contender in an era when American cycling badly needed one, finishing second in the 1977 world-championship road race and third in 1981.

Carpenter trained for the 1984 Olympics by racing against the best American men. Her gold-medal ride in Los Angeles was a photo finish against fellow American Rebecca Twigg, whom Carpenter edged with a bike thrust at the line. As Isabel Best writes in the new women's-cycling history "[Queens of Pain](#)," "It was the moment the modern era of women's cycling began."

Leontien van Moorsel

Jeannie Longo was a cyclist so dominant, as we have said, that she could have denied major victories to an entire generation of women's cyclists. She did not, and Leontien van Moorsel is one reason.

The Dutch legend claimed her first national championship in 1985, at 15. Another 15 years would pass before she reached her peak. At the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, van Moorsel became the most successful female cyclist in a single Olympiad, taking gold medals in the road race, time trial, and individual pursuit and a silver in the points race. Three years after that, she set an hour record that stood for twelve years. Her inspiration was her rival, Longo, who held the previous record.

Van Moorsel won the women's Tour de France three times, just like Longo. She won the world championship road race in 1991 and 1993, and she claimed two world time trial titles in the late 1990s.

"She helped pave the way for our generation," said Vos, the most celebrated Dutch women's cyclist since van Moorsel.

Van Moorsel's long career is largely defined by the yawning, three-year gap that sits at its center. In 1994, a campaign to drop weight for better climbing resulted in Van Moorsel becoming anorexic, her weight plummeting from 145 pounds to 95, according to [a Sports Illustrated feature](#). She didn't fully recover until 1997.

Like Longo, Van Moorsel has been [accused of doping](#), although she never failed a drug test. Whatever the reason, her performance improved dramatically in 1997, and she would remain untouchable until her retirement, fourteen years later.

Beryl Burton

Remember this name, if you don't know it, for Beryl Burton just might be the greatest women's cyclist in history.

"For a quarter century," Isabel Best writes in "Queens of Pain," "she roamed the land setting records and then shattering them, year in, year out. She was not only the strongest woman, but quite often stronger than the men."

A favorite Beryl Burton anecdote (and there are many) comes from 1967 when she set a new record for both women and men in the 12-hour time trial, an event as grueling as it sounds. Burton started out behind 99 men and proceeded to pass them all. The last was Mike McNamara, who was on his way to breaking the men's record. As she passed him, Burton offered him a licorice drop in consolation.

Burton claimed 96 national titles in her native England over a 30-year career, including 25 consecutive time trial championships in four different decades. She won seven world championships in the 1950s and 1960s, five in the individual pursuit, two in the road race. Her dominance could extend no further; there were no Olympics for women cyclists in that era, no grand tours or epic stage races.

Through it all, Burton doubled as a Yorkshire housewife and mother, a part-time cycling star without sponsorship or a proper coach. Perhaps that is why she had no real sense of tactics; Burton routinely lost world championship road races to other women she had towed to the line.

"So much of what Beryl achieved and stood for was before her time," said Lizzie Deignan, a contemporary British champion. "Taking on the men, riding through pregnancy, returning to competition after having her daughter — she greatly inspired me."

Rebecca Twigg

For an illustration of how little the world seems to regard women's cyclists, especially American ones, take a look at the Wikipedia page for Rebecca Twigg. It spans three short paragraphs.

Twigg was, along with Connie Carpenter-Phinney, arguably the most successful among several American women who blazed a trail of glory across the cycling sport in the 1980s. Born in 1963, Twigg won an astonishing six world championships in the individual pursuit, her specialty. She also claimed 16 national titles and a silver medal in the 1984 Olympic road race, the one claimed by an older, wiser Connie Carpenter-Phinney. (An iconic photo captures the two women embracing and smiling just after the finish, the winner's identity yet unknown.)

Raised in Seattle, Twigg was a prodigy who entered college at age 14. She eventually earned degrees in both biology and computer science. Her cycling career, like that of Van Moorsel, comprised two acts set off by a lengthy intermission. Twigg quit cycling at 26 and spent three years as a computer programmer before the 1992 Olympics lured her back.

Eddie Borysewicz, the great Polish-American coach, perhaps best expressed the exuberant energy that powered Rebecca Twigg at her best when he told Sports Illustrated, "She's a lady who, if she likes, she can do."

But Twigg's story is another — and in this case, tragic — illustration of how little society rewards women's cycling: She is back in Seattle now and, according to friends, [homeless](#), and living out of a car.

Alfonsina Strada

Sixty years after her death, Alfonsina Strada is remembered chiefly as the only woman to have entered one of cycling's grand tours, the ones for men. She rode in an era when cycling had little to offer women.

Born in 1891 into an Italian peasant family, Strada started riding on a bicycle her father had swapped for some chickens. For winning an early race, she was awarded a live piglet.

In 1911, Strada set an unofficial women's record for an hour of cycling, traveling just over 37 kilometers. Four decades later, when the sport introduced official record-keeping, the fastest woman on Earth (Russian cyclist Tamara Novikova) could pedal only one kilometer farther.

With no top-drawer women's races to challenge her, Strada made a career of riding against men. She rode the 1917 Giro di Lombardia, countering the objections of race officials by correctly noting that the rules failed to specify the gender of entrants. She finished the 204-kilometer contest in last place; then again, nearly half the men in the field had abandoned. She entered the Italian Giro in 1924 at the invitation of sponsors, who were looking to liven things up. Her participation proved wildly popular and suitably dramatic; after a crash, she finished one stage with a handlebar fashioned from a broomstick. Strada was one of 30 cyclists in a 90-person field to complete the race.

Vos, the Dutch champion, said she will always admire Strada for being "determined to continue, whatever the critics say."

Ina-Yoko Teutenberg

This retired sprinter from Düsseldorf, Germany, makes the list for her legendary character as much as for her legendary sprint.

Ina-Yoko Teutenberg won more than 200 races in a 20-year career, along with countless dramatic stage wins. In a busy 2008, she won two stages at the Tour de l'Aude, two more at the Route de France, three at the Tour of Holland, three at the Giro della Toscana and four at the women's Giro d'Italia.

She never medaled at the Olympics, and her only world championship came in the team time trial, with

other members of the Specialized-Lululemon squad. And that is fitting because Teutenberg is remembered as the consummate team player.

From her professional debut in 2001 through her retirement in 2013, after a frightful head injury, Teutenberg led a progression of women's cycling teams (with a bewildering corporate stew of names) that always seemed to finish the year ranked first or second in the world. Her very presence on the team proved a powerful recruiting tool, and some of the greatest women in cycling rode beside her, including time-trial legend Kristin Armstrong and three-time world champion Judith Arndt (both of whom garnered votes in our survey). Whenever she could, Teutenberg would power a teammate to victory.

"Watching Ina Teutenberg on the road was inspiring," recalled Megan Guarnier, a much-decorated, just-retired American cyclist. "She was a commanding presence, and she had — and still has — a great deal of respect in the peloton."

Our list is short, and it skews towards more recent competitors. There are undoubtedly some names that we have missed, and feats that history has already forgotten. For example, the great Tillie Anderson, a Swedish-born Chicagoan who dominated women's track racing at the turn of the last century. "As best I can determine, she competed in at least 120 six-day races through 1902, winning 109 of them," said Peter Gilles, author of "[Women on the Move: The Forgotten Era of Women's Bicycle Racing](#)." For other perspectives, check out [this piece from *Bicycling Magazine*](#), this one from [Total Women's Cycling](#), or this video from [Global Cycling Network](#) for a number of other names and interesting stories.

It's unfortunate that we can't point to a more comprehensive historical overview or database of women's racing, but we hope that will change in the future. This brief and anecdotal review does demonstrate the richness and legacy of women's bike racing, and it implies a hopeful and optimistic future for this exciting but often under-reported, under-followed and under-supported part of pro cycling.

Read Gilles's book and Isabel Best's, for a more comprehensive historical overview of women's racing. Perhaps the narrative journey will inspire you — or someone — to create a future CyclingRanking type of database for women's racing.

Daniel de Visé, March 13, 2019. Mr. de Visé is the author of "The Comeback: Greg LeMond, the True King of American Cycling, and a Legendary Tour de France" (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2018).